



**MAYOR MARIA RIVERA**  
**Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Address**

Good evening Madam President Vega, Honorable Members of the City Council, Department Directors, and residents of our city.

I'm honored tonight to deliver my second budget address during such an important time for Central Falls. Over the last year, we made progress for future generations, while working hard to support our city's neighbors, families, and businesses – all who have been impacted by COVID-19 and its devastating lasting effects.

Together, we can begin the next chapter of the City of Central Falls.

I proudly stand before you tonight to outline my vision and focus reflected in the Fiscal Year 2023 budget. This balanced budget is designed to accelerate our recovery from this pandemic and keep our city moving forward.

My focus this second year in office has been on five areas that have a direct impact on the future of our city: (1) housing and a healthy community; (2) education and our youth; (3) jobs and our economy; (4) improved city spaces and infrastructure; and (5) public safety.

While Central Falls may be the smallest city, we have big vision and have made bold progress. Our city must work for every resident, from our youngest children, to our working families, to our seniors.

We're focused on responsible spending of city resources, while developing millions in new grant and federal dollars to bring in new, life-changing opportunities.

I am overjoyed to announce *El Centro*, a one-stop supportive community center for our residents. After creating the Office of Constituent Services and Health last year, it became clear our neighbors need not only health care and pandemic relief services, but a central place to receive trusted help. We're moving this Office to El Centro. And with the help of community partners who will also be stationed on-site, El Centro will address food and housing security, provide mental and behavioral health support, and help families impacted by domestic violence.

To make this possible, we've secured \$3 million in federal dollars and additional outside resources, secured several streams of funding for substance use prevention, and identified a location! I'm thrilled! I'd especially like to thank our Congressional delegation for their support of El Centro, and our amazing Fund Developer, Derek Collamati.

Even with this exciting project, it's no secret that we desperately need more affordable, safe housing. Our lack of housing has been the single biggest challenge over the last few years, only making this pandemic harder.

I recently made a goal to develop 200 new housing units in three years. I'm pleased to report that we currently have 80 new units on a path to completion, and a new Housing Project Manager to keep us on track. But new housing isn't the only answer – we need *all of our homes* safe and healthy for families. After taking office and learning that our city had the highest rate of child lead poisoning in Rhode Island, we responded by launching a new, targeted effort last summer to combat deadly lead and have already made 200 existing homes lead-safe. We'll be providing additional resources – like a new Healthy Homes and Families Fair next month – to help property owners and renters more easily make their homes lead-free. The health of our children should not be compromised, especially in their own homes.

And as our families navigate the challenges that stemmed from this pandemic, I know how tough inflation has been – everything costs more, like groceries, utilities, and rent. Housing costs have dramatically increased in the

Northeast, with home prices and values soaring. This enabled us to propose in this budget the largest owner-occupied tax rate cut in Central Falls history. An owner-occupied tax cut will also be extended to small business owners, who will additionally get both their commercial tax and tangible tax rates cut as well. And for our vehicle owners, the car tax bill is going down and will continue to go down.

Our residents – including our children and youth – have always been at the forefront of our efforts. Plans are moving forward for our brand-new high school! I would like to thank our General Assembly delegation and state leaders again for their hard work in accomplishing this. We've identified Higginson as the new location. Over the last year, many parents and community members have been engaged in the planning process with our district and city. We're working toward an exciting spring 2023 groundbreaking!

I have an additional special announcement to make. We've been creative with our school construction funding and I am pleased to announce we'll be turning the old high school site into a new, state-of-the-art elementary school! Our city also applied for and received the most funding out of any municipality in Rhode Island to accelerate renovations at Calcutt Middle School. Between now and the end of this year, our Calcutt community can expect to see \$4 million in renovations wrapping up, from new furniture and technology, to a new multi-media library, to a beautiful new entranceway.

My vision is to have every school in Central Falls modernized within the next five years, along with a plan and resources to maintain them. To that end, we're creating a new Revolving Capital Fund in partnership with the School District and with the help of the Department of Education so that a one-time contribution – split between the City and District – will be able to complete \$2 million worth of projects over the next five years for a net cost of just \$16,000.

Supporting our youth goes far beyond school. This budget continues the great work happening in both our Parks and Recreation and Planning Departments that provide spaces and programs to our youth and families. We'll have a new afterschool opportunities coordinator stationed at El Centro, the continuation of our beloved Summer Food Program, and Summer Nonviolence opportunities to keep our high-risk youth engaged.

We'll also see exciting upgrades to the parks, fields, and courts around our city! We're breaking ground on a new basketball court at Pierce Park next month, and finishing renovations of our Saul Tarlow Little League Baseball Field. We're installing two new grant-funded tennis courts at Sacred Heart Park this summer, and at Jenks Park, installing a new modern playground and restoring Cogswell Tower. We're also breaking ground on our new Phillips Street Community Garden this July! I know many of our families and seniors are looking forward to this.

It's not just our parks and recreation opportunities we're investing in. Upgrades to our infrastructure – from roads, to sidewalks, to greenspaces – are all around our city. You may have noticed one huge change: the problematic rotary is gone! It doesn't stop there. The next step of that project is to repave Charles Street – a gateway to our city. This comes as we continue to completely upgrade Sylvan Street, replace sidewalks and plant trees within the Conant Thread Train Station District, and improve Cross, Central, Jenks, Madeira, Dexter and Broad Streets. There are plans for paving and improving Lonsdale next, and next month construction begins to install a new green stormwater system that will reduce sewer overflow into the river.

As we improve our city, we can't forget about our small businesses and workforce. We just hired our first-ever full-time, bilingual Workforce Development and Small Business Assistance coordinator. Now, we can better help our businesses thrive here, and support our residents by hosting new job fairs and improve access to high wage job opportunities.

This budget also invests in the safety of Central Falls. I'm pleased to report that violent crime in our city last year was the lowest since 1988. And overall crime was the lowest since 2004! This is credit to our hard-working Police Department over the last year – from expanding community policing to the entire department, to becoming the first in the state to be fully trained in nonviolence, to increasing our domestic violence prosecution rate.

Further, with speeding being the number one safety complaint, we rolled out a “safer streets” campaign with new traffic cameras to directly combat dangerous speeding, with red light cameras expected later this year to reduce red light running. We’ll also be introducing new speed bumps in the coming weeks where we still see excessive speeding, have a new city law that cracks down on the illegal use of ATVs on our streets, and will soon introduce cameras into our parks – like Jenks, Sacred Heart, and Macomber – to keep residents safer. As our police continue to serve our city, you’ll see more of our officers out on bicycles and walking our streets building positive relationships with our youth, families, and businesses.

Our Fire Department – another critical component of our public safety – has been a lifeline for so many families over the last year, even though they faced major equipment challenges. Our city was without the use of a functioning ambulance for eight months despite thousands of EMS calls through this pandemic. Paired with the many devastating house fires that displaced families throughout 2021, it became clear our Fire Department urgently needed resources. Through work with Congressional leaders and Rhode Island Commerce, we secured more than \$800,000 in federal grant funding to buy critical resources like two new ambulances, new training, and equipment. This budget supports this department so they can continue their live-saving work.

Moving through the spring and summer, we have so much to look forward to! I’m thrilled we’ll be bringing back our beloved Salsa Night in August, along with Central Falls Restaurant Week that will attract diners from around our state to explore our amazing cuisine and support our businesses. We also have our new Food Truck Fest, our Car Show, more fun activities with our seniors at our high rises, and so much more. We are very proud to offer events that allow our community to come together and enjoy all Central Falls has to offer.

I want to sincerely thank all members of our City Council who have been both tremendous partners in this work and leaders in our community who are deeply invested in the future of Central Falls.

I also want extend my gratitude to our incredible city department directors and staff who have worked hard to bring our vision to life over the last year, and helped ensure we provided a balanced budget to continue our success.

Lastly, I want to thank every single resident in our city. We are Central Falls – a beautiful one square mile of community and opportunity – because of you!

May God bless you all, and may God bless our City of Central Falls!